

The slides summarise the threshold as a combination of factors where losses suffered by Russian forces “would irrevocably lead to their failure to stop major enemy aggression”, a “critical situation for the state security of Russia”.

Other potential conditions include the destruction of 20 per cent of Russia’s strategic ballistic missile submarines, 30 per cent of its nuclear-powered attack submarines, three or more cruisers, three airfields, or a simultaneous hit on main and reserve coastal command centres.

Russia’s military is also expected to be able to use tactical nuclear weapons for a broad array of goals, including “containing states from using aggression [...] or escalating military conflicts”, “stopping aggression”, preventing Russian forces from losing battles or territory, and making Russia’s navy “more effective”.

Putin said last June that he felt “negatively” about using tactical nuclear strikes, but then boasted that Russia had a larger non-strategic arsenal than Nato countries. “Screw them, you know, as people say,” Putin said. The US has estimated Russia has at least 2,000 such weapons.

Putin said last year that Russian nuclear doctrine allowed two possible thresholds for using nuclear weapons: retaliation against a first nuclear strike by an enemy, and if “the very existence of Russia as a state comes under threat even if conventional weapons are used”.

But Putin himself added that neither criteria was likely to be met, and dismissed public calls from hardliners to lower the threshold.

The materials are aimed at training Russian units for situations in which the country might want the ability to use nuclear weapons, said Jack Watling, a senior research fellow for land warfare at the Royal United Services Institute, rather than setting out a rule book for their use.

“At this level, the requirement is for units to maintain — over the course of a conflict — the credible option for policymakers to employ nuclear weapons,” Watling added. “This would be a political decision.”

While Moscow has drawn close to Beijing since the war games and moved forces from the east to Ukraine, it has continued to build up its eastern defences. “Russia is continuing to reinforce and exercise its nuclear-capable missiles in the Far East near its border with China,” said William Alberque, director of strategy, technology and arms control at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. “A lot of these systems only have the range to strike China.”



Russia was still behaving in accordance with the “theory of use” of nuclear weapons set out in the documents, Alberque said. “We have not seen a fundamental rethink,” he said, adding that Russia is probably concerned that China may seek to take advantage of Moscow being distracted “to push the Russians out of Central Asia”.

The documents reflect patterns seen in exercises the Russian military held regularly before and since Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Alberque, who worked for Nato and the US defence department on arms control, pointed to examples of Russian exercises held in June and November last year using nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in two regions bordering China.

While Russia’s president has the sole authority to launch a first nuclear strike, the low threshold for tactical nuclear use set out in the documents conforms with a doctrine some western observers refer to as “escalating to de-escalate”.

Under this strategy a tactical weapon could be used to try to prevent Russia from becoming embroiled in a sprawling war, particularly one in which the US might intervene. Using what it calls “fear inducement”, Moscow would seek to end the conflict on its own terms by shocking the country’s adversary with the early use of a small nuclear weapon — or securing a settlement through the threat to do so.